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Their Times and Ours: Some Thoughts About The Middle Ages and Things in General

I have now reached the fifth volume of the New Cambridge Medieval History. Having previously read the new editions of the Ancient and Modern Histories, but only a two-volume abridgment of the old Medieval History, I felt there was a certain gap in my historical knowledge that only the Cambridge people could bridge. The British cannot be topped when it comes to producing works of this kind. They are as good at it as they are at broadcasting funerals. Therefore I set out to find the best buy available and got the whole set from Amazon Canada for \$800, about half the regular price, with door-to-door shipping to Israel for another \$20.

The fifth volume covers the 13th century. Like most of the others it is divided into a regional section, mostly political, and a thematic section, mostly social, with of course a great deal about the Church. The Middle Ages have gotten a pretty bad name, even being called “dark” by some, but no one who looks into it will deny that the 13th century was an age of prosperity marked by a tremendous expansion of population and commensurate economic growth. As I read through this volume, and the others as well, I begin to get the feeling that despite the ignorance and tyranny, and of course the matter of life expectancy, these people were really no worse off than we are.

What I mean to say is that the 13th century looks very much like our own 19th century, which, as centuries go, was a fairly tranquil time after Napoleon was gotten out of the way, whereas the 14th century with its Hundred Years War, Black Death and economic crisis was more like the 20th with its unparalleled bloodshed and dislocations, the kitchen appliances and moon landings notwithstanding. Yet even in the 14th century, as in the 20th, and even in the real darkness of the 6th century (“Mundus senescit,” wrote Gregory of Tours: “The world grows old”) and the gloom of the year 1000, when it seemed the world was truly about to end and God’s children wore bright colors to cheer themselves up, life was usually pretty uneventful. Historical time is not measured in weeks and months but in many, many years, and in these centuries large pieces of time might go by without anything really happening. History rarely touches us, and when it does, as lethal as it may be, it touches us for a moment only. Even at what would appear at first glance to be the extremes, among the Jews under Muslim rule as depicted by S.D. Goitein in *A Mediterranean Society* via the Cairo Genizah or among the persecuted Cathar or Albigensian heretics as depicted by Le Roy Ladurie in *Montaillou* via Jacques Fournier’s *Registre d’Inquisition*, it turns out that life went on and was for the most part private and undisturbed.

What was the 13th century like then, first of all politically?

In England this was the age of Magna Carta, the contemplation of which is bound to bring a lump to the throat of true Englishmen. Yet even an enthusiast like Winston Churchill recognized it for what it was: “a redress of feudal grievances extorted from an unwilling king by a discontented ruling class insisting on its privileges,” or, to put it more bluntly, a bid by rapacious magnates to wrest power from a rapacious monarch. The population of England in the 13th century was around 4 million. The number of barons and earls was about 200. Add to this a few bishops and abbots and you have the ruling class. Much farther down the ladder were around 1,200 knights of the shires or counties who owned two or

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more manors and the burgesses of the towns. These last two classes would come to constitute the parliamentary Commons. Peasants made up 85% of the population. England was thus a country that effectively belonged to an elite of around 1,500 individuals who had seized or been “gifted” by other thieves all of its land. However, things were still in flux, that is, land was still being grabbed.

Land grabbing was of course not unique to England. All aristocracies come into being through the taking of land by brute force. This was the reality of the human jungle, differing from the natural jungle only in that in the natural jungle the animals did not systematically slaughter one another. What brings the lump to the throat of Englishmen is that out of these brutal beginnings, with all this stolen land being passed down from one titled nonentity to another in the “great” British families, British democracy was born, that is, in the place of the magnates came gray little men making millions in the City, Fleet Street press lords controlling public opinion, polluters of the land, sea and air, powerhouse junk food manufacturers, shills, scammers and swindlers. Democracy was therefore tailor-made for the new economic elite, getting the nonelite population to go along by letting it say whatever came into its head and choose which members of the elite would rule it directly.

In France this was the age of three Philips and two Louies in the Capetian line. French history since the death of Charlemagne was all about how the seigneurs pulled away from the kings and how the kings pulled them back. At their weakest the kings effectively controlled just the Ile-de-France – the Paris area – while the seigneurs effectively controlled the rest. At their strongest the kings controlled everything. The rest of the population – say, 15 million Franks or Frenchmen – controlled nothing and counted for even less. That was France.

In Italy things were slightly better, though Italy too in its separate parts had always belonged to someone, with the Holy Roman Emperor waiting in the wings – the south to whomever could get their hands on it (Byzantines, Arabs, Normans), the soft midsection to the popes, and the northern republics and city-states to rival aristocratic factions such as those Shakespeare imagined in *Romeo and Juliet*. However, in the north, the *popolo* had always counted for something and in the urban communes threw its weight behind one faction or another until the despotic *signori* emerged and put an end to the chaos.

The bottom line of Medieval Italy is of course the Renaissance, essentially in place by the 14th century, when Petrarch figuratively parted company from Dante. Its hallmark, shaping the ethos of the Modern West more than any single factor, was the cooption of humanism by the emerging bourgeoisie, who found in its celebration of the individual a rationale for its own rapaciousness and self-aggrandizement while the humanists, who were after all the wayward sons of the bourgeoisie, found in their patrons the means to maintain the standard of living they had gotten used to in their fathers’ houses. It is not really Magna Carta that created Fleet Street and the City, laissez faireism, classical liberalism, and the spoiled children of the New Left, but precisely this unholy symbiosis.

In Germany the end of the Hohenstaufen dynasty saw the institution of elective monarchy, the increasing power of the territorial princes and the growth of the free cities. It would be nearly 600 years before the forces of nationalism prevailed and the country was reunited politically. Spain was near to completing the *Reconquista*. The Arab world was divided. In Egypt the tolerant or perhaps simply incompetent Fatimids had left people alone as long as they paid their taxes while in the Maghreb the vicious Almohads made everyone’s life miserable.

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However, with the growing influence of the clerics in Egypt under the succeeding Ayyubids everyone's life became miserable there too. In Baghdad the Abbasid caliphate revived after years of Seljuk dominance but was swept aside again by the Mongols and the Mamelukes. Constantinople began the 13th century raped by the Latin Crusaders, egged on by a blind Venetian doge, the repulsive Enrico Dandolo, aged ninety or so. Byzantium had had its ups and downs. Gibbon chronicled its corruption and degeneracy and set the stage for its imminent demise on virtually every page of his great History and yet it survived for a thousand years.

All these redoubtable gentlemen were of course involved with one another in traditional conflicts. The popes clashed with the kings over the question of ultimate authority. The English reached toward Scotland and Wales. The Crusaders held on in the Holy Land. The Swedes fought against the Russians and the Norwegians against the Lapps. But these were for the most part leisurely affairs involving those best suited to sit on a horse. For everyone else life simply went on, until finally the peasants and tradesmen became us, the viewing audience of the modern world.

Socially, as feudalism reached its apogee, the aristocratic household became the center of a vast network of dependent relations involving kinship and vassalage where magnates and knights, *nobiles* and *domini*, spent their time paying homage to one another when they weren't out fighting. Theirs was a social order that can only strike us as completely insane, as in the solemn determination of who might fight against whom by degree of consanguinity. However, the society that evolved in the Middle Ages made perfect sense to its members, just as ours, no less insane, does to us. It is, I suppose, through the widespread misunderstanding of evolution that we have come to believe that things are always getting better and that therefore at any given moment we are living in the best of possible worlds. As evidence, one may cite antibiotics and cell phone applications. Unlike earlier peoples, we believe, we do not stand still or overlook the obvious, as America's Founding Fathers did, for example, when they determined that in presidential elections the candidate with the second highest number of votes would become vice president, thereby unwittingly assuring that the president would have as his deputy his greatest rival, or the Ancient Romans when they neglected to give the state the power to prosecute criminals, leaving it to private citizens to bring even murderers to trial. But the truth is, our own social order, where baseball players and dog food manufacturers make millions and teachers, nurses and farmers make peanuts, cannot by any stretch of the imagination be called rational either.

Among married women, adultery was a leading motif in the romantic literature of the period, but like all popular notions of married life in patriarchal societies, this one too is undoubtedly exaggerated. The real misunderstanding of patriarchal marriage, however, concerns day-to-day relations between husband and wife, which privately could only have been a function of the strength of character of the parties involved and not of social custom. Therefore, as in modern times among traditional Arabs and Jews, households may just as easily have been dominated by the will of a strong woman as by the will of a strong man though the man would always appear to take the lead in ritualized settings. Publicly the seemingly meek woman walks a step behind her husband but behind closed doors she does not hesitate to let him know exactly what is on her mind.

At the lower end of the system were the serfs and freemen – the peasant population – all bound in body to someone, so that for all practical purposes

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there was little difference between them. But while the lives of the peasants were circumscribed economically by their lords and morally by the Church, there was plenty of leeway between the two and for the most part they lived relaxed though hard-working lives with not a little merriment when the opportunity presented itself. They were in fact far less repressed than “fundamentalists” of the present age. I do not, however, mean to romanticize the life of the 13th century peasant. The majority of freemen did not work enough land to feed their families (a few acres which they paid for in rents or taxes and service) and had to rely on extra income as laborers or artisans or sink into dire poverty and have to turn to the community for help. But the majority of peasants were by no means paupers. Writing in 1924, long before the 20th century had played itself out, Huizinga was able to say of the “violent tenor of life” in the Middle Ages that “calamities and indigence were more afflicting than at present.” We of course know better now.

The biggest city in Europe was Paris, with 200,000 inhabitants. Venice and Florence had 100,000, Cologne, Milan, Bruges, Genoa and London at least 50,000. London was well on its way to becoming the cesspool of the Western World, a vast broth of slops and excrement to which the majority of its unfortunate citizens would be consigned by their callous rulers. Few civilized nations have displayed such cruelty toward their own kind as the British. But that’s another story. Venice, as Martino da Canale wrote in his Chronicles, was a city of lords and ladies, mariners and moneychangers, merchants and craftsmen. When the new doge was welcomed in 1268, 50 galleys saluted him from the port and a dazzling procession of guildsmen marched by his palace: smiths, furriers, weavers, tailors, clothiers, quilters, mercers, butchers, fishmongers, bakers, glaziers, comb and lantern makers. Some were wealthier than others and many were of course poor, struggling as wage earners and living in filth and disease. The wealthier one was or aspired to be, the more important was deportment. Appearance was everything, for new money could never measure up to old and new names meant nothing. Appearance would continue to mean everything later too, when our own middle class emerged in the sociological sense, creating a middle class world of big dreams and small achievement.

Trade was in local markets and the great fairs. Bulk goods came in through the big ports – grain, wine, salt and oil, timber and iron, and of course textiles. Luxury goods arrived from distant lands – furs from Russia, silks from China, spices from India. Bulk trade was stimulated by the accelerated growth of the population and luxury trade by the cheap labor and high rents that were its by-products, making landlords rich in a rapidly expanding cash economy. This, however, was not to last. Population growth began to tail off toward the end of the century when it outstripped food supply, and the disastrous 14th century took care of the rest.

Schools were mostly ecclesiastical, teachers churchmen, students well born. The curriculum included the seven liberal arts, taken over from the Romans – the *trivium* for grammar, dialectic and rhetoric, the *quadrivium* for arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy – as well as the study of religious subjects and right conduct, supplying the Church with its clerics and the ruling class and the towns with their physicians, lawyers, scribes and administrators. Out of these schools the first universities emerged in the beginning of the 13th century, most prominently in Bologna and Paris, in the form of associations of masters and/or students looking to break away from the control of the Church and the municipalities in what had come to be an intellectually freer age. Here the faculties included

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Medicine, Law, the Arts and Theology. Peasant children occasionally learned to read in the vernacular at parish schools and much of the lower clergy was itself poorly educated.

How does one characterize an entire century, even our own, other than in conventional terms? And do these conventional terms give us a real sense of time and place, that is, of what it felt like to be alive at a certain moment? Perhaps this is the novelist's task. For the private world of each of us does not belong to history until we act, and then our acts can be weighed against the acts of others and the balance can be called history, which is a record of public acts and their consequences. But those who do not act in history are nonetheless caught up in its processes, and it is these processes that also determine the present moment, so that they enter into our private worlds as well. What it feels like to be alive at a given moment is thus shaped by the feel of the world that history has wrought. The peasant, the merchant, the nobleman of the 13th century entered a world whose possibilities were clearly defined, just as we do in ours. However, whereas a peasant in the Middle Ages could not become rich, powerful or prominent beyond the confines of his class, in our society it is thought that anyone can, though in fact few do. The modern world thus promotes dreams more extensively than the Middle Ages. It is in effect built on dreams, for modern societies can only sustain their illusion of freedom if ordinary people are encouraged to dream of being extraordinary.

But it is not just potency that is diluted among ordinary people in a modern society, it is also knowledge; for the truth is that today's man in the street is neither wiser nor more knowledgeable than a Breton or Northumberland peasant in the 13th century, and conceivably less so than plain folks in the 19th century. In fact he is pretty ignorant, as Jay Leno and others have shown us over the years, with only the vaguest notions about the world around him. Whatever sense of the world he does have comes from secondrate journalists, who themselves lack the knowledge, understanding, discipline and integrity to be historians or even novelists and therefore shape his perception like the ignorant clerics of the Middle Ages, raining down on his head a disjointed and superficial body of information presented largely to produce effects, and even this is beyond his capacity to retain, not that he is to blame, for he is the product of Western education, such as it is. The man in the street may be said to have a great many opinions but very little knowledge, mindlessly repeating the half-truths of "experts" and "analysts" who reflect his own biases and constructing out of them a "credo" of dogmatic views that remain embedded in his mind for an entire lifetime like bricks in a brick wall.

Journalists, however, cannot be faulted for the state of Western education. For this it is again the clerics who are to blame, for until not so long ago, historically speaking, nearly all teachers continued to be churchmen. The view of the Church that as a consequence of Original Sin all men are born evil and must therefore be coerced into doing what is good produced schools that made study a burden and turned the natural curiosity of the child into an aversion to the learning process that persists to this day in rigidly structured frameworks where teachers hammer away at the captive child until his head is ready to explode. (Canetti expressed this very well in *Crowds and Power*: "Those most beset by commands are children. It is a miracle that they do not collapse under the burden of commands laid upon them by their parents and teachers. That they in turn, and in an equally cruel form, should give identical commands to their children is as natural as mastication or speech.") Consequently children come to "hate" history, geography, arithmetic, science, language and literature and in adult life become easy

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prey for journalists who are only slightly less ignorant than themselves, though far more articulate. Some will argue that modern educational systems do their job by supplying society with its elites, but this is of course an illusion. All that is proven by the emergence of elites is that the public schools cannot destroy them, for elites take care of themselves, possessing the talent and ambition to survive the system. As for the nonelite population – say, 80% of students – they are of course shortchanged. There is after all no reason why grocers or truck drivers should not read poetry, listen to symphonies, visit museums, or take an interest in science and history. Western education makes sure they won't.

Ignorance and impotence are thus the lot of the vast majority of men and women in the modern world, just as they were in the Middle Ages. Ignorance, however, does not really impede the ignorant, for people can live satisfactory lives without very much knowledge or culture. Whether we sit at home watching reality shows or reading Proust is not going to determine how happy we are, though happiness itself is of course a feeling that comes and goes rather than a condition and most of the time most of us are neither happy nor unhappy but simply engaged in the business of living. But if ignorance does not weigh our moods in the direction of unhappiness, impotence does. The condition of being a cog in the wheel, in a rut, stymied in one's hopes and dreams drags us down when we are not fully distracted. Many of us are therefore unhappy more often than we are happy and some of us are unhappy often enough for our state truly to be called a condition. This applies to our elites as much as to ordinary people, for anyone can be stymied. Half the marriages in America end in divorce and according to the U.S. Department of Health one out of every four American adults suffers from some form of mental illness, from clinical depression and acute anxiety to outright psychoses, and 8.7% of Americans over the age of 12 (22.1 million Americans) are drug addicts and/or alcoholics, with the rate for alcoholism alone 13.6% in the 18-25 age group.

In the Middle Ages, ordinary men and women were also engaged most of the time in the business of living and therefore they too were neither happy nor unhappy most of the time. Their pleasures were no less satisfying than ours and their expectations met with fewer disappointments insofar as they were less grandiose. In the West it is clearly the raising of expectations that makes us so vulnerable to the disappointment of shattered dreams. Those who are defeated by life in the sense that they do not win the great prizes that are dangled in front of their noses wherever they turn adopt many strategies to live with such defeat. Some of these work, others don't, though not everyone is caught up in the dream. Many have modest goals and some live by a higher order of values like honor and decency and even love and consequently thrive. Even our material advantages and comforts are mostly superfluous and it is not too difficult to imagine living without them, just as it is not too difficult to imagine living without a host of frivolous occupations whose sole purpose is to generate economic activity and move money from one pocket to another. On the whole, modern life, stripped of the illusion of freedom, is superior to medieval life, just as it is superior to ancient life, largely to the extent that it lasts longer. This is no small thing but few of us would argue that it is enough.

It may seem facetious to suggest that medieval peasants lived as well as most of us do today – sometimes even materially, vis-à-vis our own poor, and certainly inwardly – but I doubt if any index of happiness or contentment would show any great difference between the two. Most of us stay pretty close to a kind of median line with ups and downs that are generally not too radical. This is true

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in any age and is called sanity. It may be that we have done much better collectively but human progress rests on a fairly small elite that has carried the rest of us along and it is this elite that has reaped most of the rewards, enjoying considerably more wealth, knowledge, freedom, power and fame than the vast majority of men and women, whether they are Nobel Prize winners or talk show hosts. The assumption that elites deserve more because one way or another they have gotten to the front of the line is at the heart of our social system. The question of whether a society should be organized for the convenience of a small minority of its population (the American Revolution, after all, was a rebellion of white, male property owners – no more than 15% of the American population – who didn't think to give the rights they claimed for themselves to any other Americans) has been answered decisively in most societies, as it is the elites themselves who frame the questions and ultimately provide the answers. The domination of the weak by the strong does in fact mirror nature and is no less marked today than in the Middle Ages or at any other time in human history. The men who drew pictures on the walls of caves 40,000 years ago were neither less happy nor less moral than we are and the same is true of the inhabitants of the Middle Ages. That while reaching for the stars we have come no further in the quality of our inner lives is one of the great ironies of history.